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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the development of the concept of the "public" and the "people" in U.S. society. Community problem-solving is an art, and like the art of dance or the game of soccer, the dispositions and skills of communal life are learned by doing and reflecting on what has been done. This essay discusses the "arts" of democracy, including: (1) Active Listening; (2) Creative Conflict; (3) Mediation; (4) Negotiation; (5) Imagination; (6) Public Talk; (7) Public Judgement; and (8) Reflection. Practicing these skills contributes positively to one's community. This paper does not set out to be a "how to" recipe of community collaboration but offers research into these "arts" of citizenship and how they develop. (EH)

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**TRANSFORMING "THE PEOPLE" INTO "THE PUBLIC":
THE DNA OF COMMUNITY COLLABORATION**

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COLLABORATION

Give your difference, welcome my difference, unify all difference in the larger whole--such is the law of growth. The unifying of difference is the eternal process of life--the creative synthesis, the highest act of creation.

-Mary Parker Follett

During a recent conference plenary session on *Community, Difference & Civic Engagement*, Dr. David Mathews shared his observation of a series of public forums held in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Mathews, the president of the Kettering Foundation, suggested that in Grand Rapids, as everywhere else, serious social and economic problems confront people. In the first forum a woman who had lost two sons to random street violence said something that captures a growing feeling in America. If we are going to prevent this problem, she said, "we've got to band together."¹ Increasingly, in communities across this nation, people are coming to the same conclusion: nothing will change unless people act collaboratively.

But banding together to deal with the life-threatening social pathologies is problematic because our very notion of community has descended the pedestals of our minds. Today when people think of community, they are not likely to conjure up John Winthrop's illusionary city on a hill in which "we delight in each other, seek to make other's condition our own, rejoice together, labor and

suffer together, always having before our eyes our community as members of the same body."² Indeed, as Parker Palmer suggests in his book, *The Company of Strangers*, we should always remember "that the foundation of life together is not the intimacy of friends but the capacity of strangers to share a common territory, common resources, common problems--without ever becoming friends."³

James A. Joseph has suggested in *Remaking America* that the word stranger is perhaps excessive as metaphors go, but nonetheless calls for a new paradigm of community which provides greater civic cohesion and social solidarity from something other than a common race, a common religion, or a common culture.⁴ Joseph's paradigm takes us to the heart of our public life, where we can connect the little boxes that divide us into "we" and "they" groups with the larger world of public action. Imagine the possibility of a *shared community culture* in which very different people come together to consider difficult problems, confident that they will be heard, understood, and influence the outcome. Such a culture enables people to recognize their mutual identity, come together in public, and agree to disagree within acceptable boundaries. Given these assumptions, the concept of public--which should suggest those things a differentiated people hold in common--takes on a new and powerful meaning.

But trace the genealogical lineage of the "public" back through the historical family tree and you find that actually, the word "public" is not as admired in American culture as the notion of "the people." Even today many interpret "the public" to mean a

crowd--or worse, a mob. Thus the public is seen as uniformed, unruly, even dangerous.⁵

The word "public" means all the people, without equivocation, who focus on a common problem or problems. A historically correct notion of the "public" suggest a wide array of opportunities for people to interact in public, interactions which nurture the human inclination toward life together. The public street, where strangers pursue private interests, allows us to look into the eyes of someone different and know that we both occupy the same space, a fact which must be acknowledged in order to get along. City parks, sidewalk cafes, and museums allow strangers to pause in each other's presence and discover things held in common. Carnivals, festivals, and fairs enable people to be entertained and to entertain--in reality our interdependence can be a source of great joy. But life isn't all fun and games--conflict is an inevitable reality of life's vale of tears--so forums, public hearings, and debates allow strangers to listen and be heard, to express their differences, to influence one another, and to move toward collaboration.⁶

Community problem-solving is an art, and like the art of dance or the game of soccer, the dispositions and skills of our communal life are learned by doing and reflecting on what we have done. Practicing these skills contributes positively to one's community. Human beings are, after all, social beings--we are dependent on one another. But the catch is we are not always effective social creatures. While most folks have the potential to communicate, to

resolve conflict, or to envision a better society, that potential is not always reached. To realize this untapped potential, deliberate learning is required. But how? What should a correct catechism contain? Though this piece doesn't set out to be a "how to" recipe of community collaboration, Frances Moore Lappe and Paul Martin DuBois have suggested several "democratic arts" in *The Quickening of America* that can be cultivated in order to make a difference in most communities. The first four "arts" are frequently, but not always, practiced one-on-one. The remaining skills enable groups, or communities, to better relate to one another.⁷

ARTS OF DEMOCRACY

Art One: Active Listening

When you listen to someone speak on a subject that is of importance to him or her, you are engaged in and supportive of that speaker's efforts, whether or not you agree with what the speaker is saying. Listening allows you to discover the speaker's underlying meaning in a nonjudgemental manner. After listening for a period, you might discover that your initial impression of the speaker's message was superficial at best, and that you do in fact share mutual interest. Once speaker and listener have discovered their commonality, adjustments in otherwise rigid positions are possible. But in order to listen, you must first make others feel comfortable--reach out to them, and then, sometimes just be quiet. As you take in what the speaker is saying, be encouraging and feed back what you hear, but ask probing questions.

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Art Two: Creative Conflict

There is the possibility that as you listen to the views of others, you could find yourself in disagreement. But disagreement can be constructive, as it uncovers interests you might not know existed and demonstrates that diverse stakeholders are involved. Armed with such deepened understanding, a group or community gains confidence as additional options are generated and explored. Creative conflict is "creative" when diversity is valued and the prevailing environment is "safe" for differences. As conflict surfaces, focus on solutions to the present problems, agree to disagree when there is no common ground, and try not to express anger. Remember that disagreement is much more manageable if you are well prepared, leave labels at the door, and above all, make no permanent enemies.

Art Three: Mediation

"Blessed are the peacemakers" and blessed is the community that counts among its citizens skilled and neutral listeners who help those in conflict "hear" one another. Mediation makes problem solving possible by reducing unproductive conflict, while enhancing mutual respect. Neutral mediators can better encourage those in conflict to voice their opinions, can listen carefully so as to bring differences to the surface, can pose questions in a non-judgmental fashion to uncover common interest, and can stress the common ground that disputants may not see.

Art Four: Negotiation

On more than one occasion Lyndon Johnson encouraged those

pursuing conflicting interests to "come and reason together" so that everyone's needs might be met. Such a process increases the likelihood that conflict resolution will be possible, and that agreements will be upheld. Negotiation also lays the foundation for future problem-solving. But in order to negotiate you must know your own interests well enough to know what can be compromised; search for common interests and don't get bogged down over means. Above all, keep talking.

Art Five: Imagination

What type of community do you wish to live in? When we reimagine current reality to accommodate our values and needs, we tap creative and positive energy. Imagination makes goal setting possible, and requires only that your mind's eye contrast your community as it is with the world you wish for. Work on trying to hold both images in you consciousness at once, and try not to engage in either cynicism or naivete.

Art Six: Public Talk

Dialogue on matters that affect all of us, but in which differences are valued, is the foundation of our democratic society. Such public talk reveals the values that are reflected in our communities, and expands our knowledge and understanding of these values. The "how-to's" of this are simple; all that is required is a willingness to engage someone with the following invitation--"my friend, we have a problem; let's talk." Such conversations build trust and probe the values upon which complex issues rest.

Art Seven: Public Judgement

Discriminating reason, arrived at through talk and reflection, usually results in a greater willingness to accept tough tradeoffs. Coming to public judgement isn't easy and requires a lot of hard work. We start when we explore the values that underlie alternative courses of action and learn to accept the consequences of our choices.

Art Eight: Reflection

The evaluation of the lessons learned via our interactions with one another helps improve the practice of these arts. Reflection should become a habit; after each public action, talk about what worked and what didn't, and what lessons your community has learned.¹

When people practice these arts and encourage others to do so, they strengthen their communities. This collaboration encourages people to move outside their neighborhoods or their personal values and to make connections with participants in the larger community.

Parker Palmer offers as an example a Sunday School class in a small African-American church in the rural south in the early 1960's. There were no more than five children present but the class proceeded with a strict adherence to Robert's Rules of Order. There was a class president who presided, a class secretary taking notes, and a parliamentarian ready to resolve questions of process. Palmer felt the entire scene was greatly overdone, and asked the pastor why a more casual approach was not appropriate. The pastor argued that Palmer had witnessed individuals who were learning to

function in a public, or community setting. The pastor felt that this type of experience would prepare his people for life in larger and more crucial public settings, settings where questions of justice for the black community were being decided.'

To conclude this essay by suggesting that the communities across our nation are in jeopardy with growing crime rates, environmental pollution, hopelessness, challenges of global competition, poverty, and illiteracy would be an understatement. Not the least of these challenges is organizing the different interests, demands, perspectives, policies, goals and purposes into coherent choices. As an individual, I have to know not just what I think and want, but what we think that we can and should do. The only way we can establish such common ground is to band together.

No one should underestimate the importance, or the difficulty of banding together. Such collaboration is not easy; it requires hard thinking, a discerning ear, making difficult choices, and reaching shared judgement. Pericles, describing the democracy of the Athens he knew, said "Instead of evoking discussion as a stumbling block in the way of action, we think it an indispensable preliminary to any action as all." Today he might suggest that people who wish to strengthen their communities do so in collaboration with others, an understanding that transforms "the people " into "the public."

1. David Mathews, "Are Academic Preoccupations and Public Imperatives Out of Sync?" 31 March 1995, *Community, Difference & Civic Engagement*, The Palmer House Hilton, Chicago, Illinois.
2. John Winthrop, "Models of Christian Charity." In Edmund S. Morgan (ed.), *Puritan Political Ideas, 1558-1974* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), p. 92.
3. Parker Palmer, *The Company of Strangers* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), p. 40.
4. James A. Joseph, *Remaking America* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995), p. 14.
5. Robert H. McKenzie, *Public Politics* (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt, 1994), p. 5.
6. Palmer, *The Company of Strangers*, pp. 35-37.
7. Frances Moore Lappe and Paul Martin DuBois, *The Quickening of America* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994), p. 9.
8. Ibid., pp. 239-282.
9. Palmer, *The Company of Strangers*, p. 83.

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